
A high-angle, vertical photograph showing three military medical personnel rappelling down the side of a red building. They are wearing white helmets with "TECHNICAL RESCUE" and a blue Star of Life emblem, black t-shirts, and full rappelling gear including ropes and harnesses. The person at the top is looking down, the middle person is in a crouched position, and the bottom person is reaching up. In the background, a residential street with houses and a sidewalk is visible.

MDW team members CPT Aaron Hill, SGT Tim Hickes and SPC Dustin Overholt prepare to bring a Stokes litter and dummy "patient" up over the side of a building.

SEARCH AND



A recent exercise tested the rescue skills of the Military District of Washington's Engineer Company.



SGT Tim Hickes crosses between two apartment buildings during the early part of Rescue Challenge. The exercise drew teams from throughout Virginia.

Story by SPC Jonathan Wiley
Photos by Paul Disney

MEMBERS of the Army's only technical rescue team — the Military District of Washington Engineer Company — tested their skills during a search-and-rescue exercise in May.

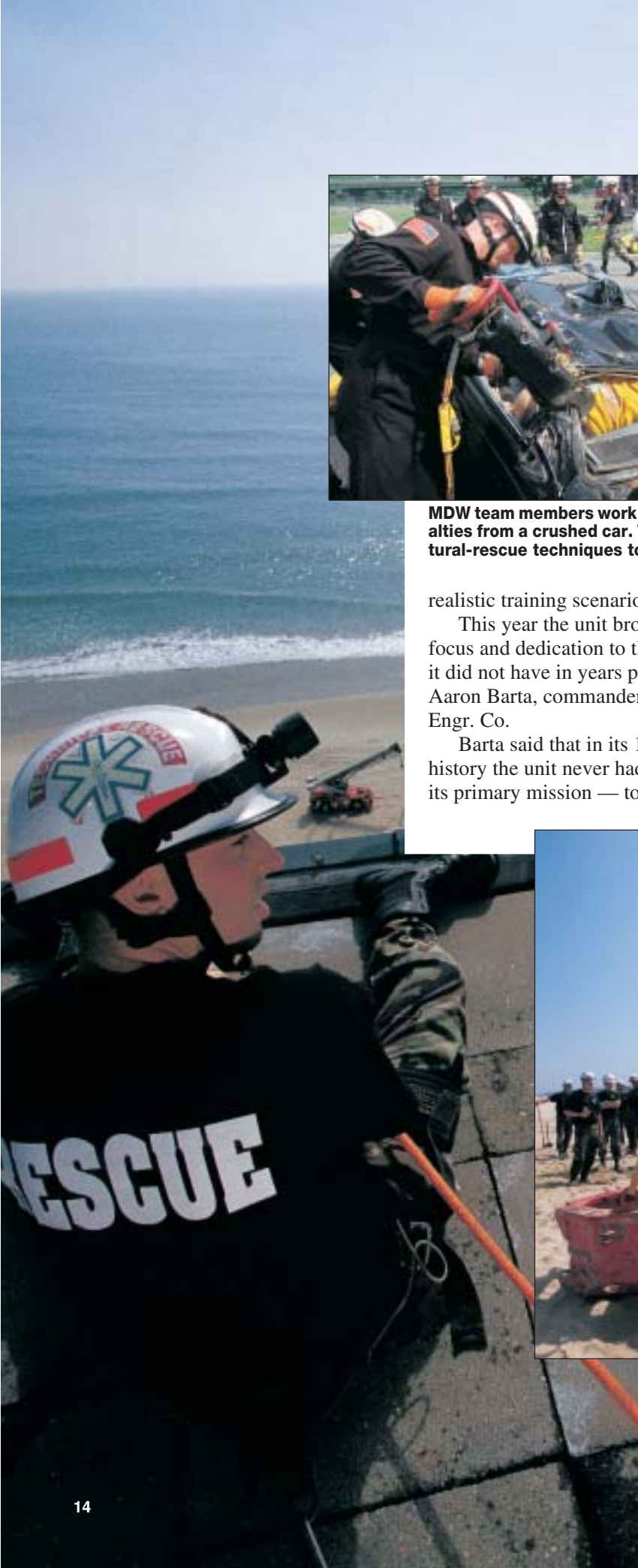
Based at Fort Belvoir, Va., the team traveled to Virginia Beach, Va., to participate in the four-day event with other technical rescue teams from around the state.

The MDW team has participated in the annual Rescue Challenge exercise for the past several years. The event tests such technical rescue skills as high line rope rescue, confined-space rescue, light and heavy structural collapse rescue, and trench rescue by having teams complete a series of

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RESCUE Challenge



MDW team members work to free two simulated casualties from a crushed car. The soldiers adapted structural-rescue techniques to the task.

realistic training scenarios.

This year the unit brought a special focus and dedication to the event that it did not have in years past, said CPT Aaron Barta, commander of the MDW Engr. Co.

Barta said that in its 11-year history the unit never had to perform its primary mission — to provide

rescue support for military and federal contingencies in the National Capital Region.

“Before Sept. 11, no one thought we’d ever be called on to perform our mission. We know now that we always have to be ready. Sept. 11 was like any other day — until the attack. If it could happen that day, it can happen any day. We can’t say we’ll be ready next month; we have to ready today,” Barta said.

SSG Mark Williams, platoon sergeant for the unit’s light-rescue platoon, said it was difficult to keep the team motivated before the attack, although his soldiers were always trained to be proficient in their skills, as a matter of pride.

When the team responded following the Pentagon attack, it braced the building’s supporting columns to prevent their collapse. The soldiers arrived just hours after the attack and remained for 10 days, working 24-hour shifts until the massive search-and-rescue operation to recover the attack’s victims was completed.

Williams said that while seeing fellow soldiers being taken out of the Pentagon in body bags took a toll on him, the image and the nature of the soldiers’ deaths made him want to do more at this year’s “Challenge.”

“This is no game. We have to do everything right — both the small things and the big things — so if a tragedy like this ever happens



While the view from atop a building (left) is great the ground-level view of a chunk of old machinery that must be pulled from the surf (above) is daunting.



A team member secures a line that will help brace a tripod used during a victim-recovery scenario.

again, we'll be able to act quickly to save lives," Williams said.

Others in the unit share his enthusiasm, Williams said.

"You can see it on their faces. This year, they didn't come to Virginia Beach to have fun. They came to learn rescue techniques," he said.

The unit benefited from watching seven other technical-rescue teams from civilian fire departments respond to the same scenarios.

"Challenge's instructors designed eight rescue scenarios for which various responses were appropriate," said site instructor Mike Brown, a battalion chief with the Virginia Beach Fire Department.

"We want the teams to be able to think quickly, and we're looking at how they respond to the challenges. If their plan A doesn't work, they need to have a plan B," Brown said.

In one rescue scenario, soldiers arrived at a scene where an automobile had been crushed under a 42,000-pound school bus. They had two-and-a-half hours to retrieve mannequins trapped inside the car. Within minutes, the soldiers agreed on one approach to accomplish their mission.

"Most of the weight of the bus is up front, so we used air bags and wood blocks to jack the back of the bus three feet in the air," said Williams.

The MDW team rarely conducts vehicular-rescue exercises, Williams said, but it quickly adapted techniques used in structural collapse scenarios to complete the task.

In another scenario, a team member had to rappel from the top of a 10-story building, using only a rope.

"When you're up that high, you just have to trust your equipment and the people you're working with," said SGT Brian Flick.

"One of the problems we have as the only Army technical rescue team is we have to set up our scenarios, which means we have the answers beforehand. In this exercise, we weren't privy to the answers, so it was much more realistic and challenging," Barta said. □



It takes every member of the team to help pull the "screaming jackass," a 3,000-pound piece of an old bark chipper, through the surf during one of the more innovative scenarios.